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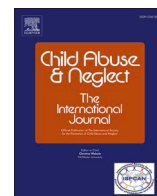
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Experiences of young parents with foster care backgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unique challenges to parents of young children, due to the closure of schools and childcare centers, and increased caregiver burden. These challenges may be especially pronounced for youth with foster care backgrounds, as they lack critical support and resources to rely on during emergency situations.

Objective: The purpose of the present study was to examine the experiences of these vulnerable young parents since the beginning of the pandemic.

Participants and setting: Our study included 17 young parents ages 18–26, who had recently aged out of foster care or were currently in extended care. Participants were predominantly female, and Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC).

Methods: Youth participated in virtual focus groups or individual interviews and described their experiences and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. A structured thematic analysis approach was employed to examine key themes in youths' accounts.

Results: Analysis resulted in five major themes: (a) employment disruptions and economic hardships, (b) educational challenges for parents and children, (c) parental and child mental health concerns, (d) insufficient resources and barriers to service receipt, and (e) "silver linings".

Conclusions: Young parents with foster care backgrounds faced numerous challenges due to COVID-19 and struggled to access critical resources and supports. Implications for policy, practice, and research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since early 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has spread rapidly throughout the United States, leading to over 30 million known infections and nearly 615,000 deaths to date (CDC COVID Data Tracker, 2021). In the early stages of the pandemic, shelter-in-place orders were implemented in most states, requiring residents to leave their homes for essential activities only, such as grocery shopping, medical visits, and employment defined as essential (Dave et al., 2021). These requirements were implemented swiftly and have led to significant changes in the daily lives of most Americans (Berry et al., 2021).

Shelter-in-place mandates, social distancing, and quarantine requirements were found to disproportionately impact disadvantaged populations, including young people with foster care backgrounds (Ruff & Linville, 2021). Preliminary research on the experiences of these young people has pointed to numerous adverse effects of the pandemic in domains such as education, employment, housing, finances, and physical and mental health (Greeson et al., 2020; Ruff & Linville, 2021). Nevertheless, no research has focused on the unique experiences of current and former foster youth who parent young children.

Young people who have been in foster care become parents earlier than their counterparts in the general youth population (Courtney et al., 2005; Shpiegel et al., 2018). On average, about 20% of young women and 10% of young men become parents by age 19 (Courtney et al., 2016; King & Van Wert, 2017; Shpiegel et al., 2017), and these figures rise to 40% and 20%, respectively, by age 21 (Courtney et al., 2018; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018). Parenting youth have experienced unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the closure of schools and childcare centers, increased caregiver burden, and limited access to school-based services and supports (Russell et al., 2020). These challenges may be especially pronounced among youth with foster care backgrounds, as they tend to be disadvantaged economically (Combs et al., 2017; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018), and lack family safety nets and other critical supports (Chase et al., 2006; Haight et al., 2009). The purpose of the present study was to extend existing research on the experiences of foster youth during the COVID-19 pandemic (Greeson et al., 2020; Ruff & Linville, 2021), and focus on the unique experiences of those who parent young children.

2. Literature review

2.1. The challenges of young parents with foster care backgrounds

Despite an overall decline in the adolescent birth rate in the United States (Mathews & Hamilton, 2016), young people who have been in foster care continue to be vulnerable to early parenthood (Courtney et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2010; Shpiegel et al., 2017). Specific estimates vary, with studies reporting that 18% to 32% of young women with foster care histories give birth by age 19 (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2016; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2016; Shpiegel et al., 2017) and 35% to 57% give birth by age 21 (Courtney et al., 2007; Courtney et al., 2018; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2016; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018). Studies involving young men have been limited, with current estimates suggesting that about 10% become fathers by age 19, and close to 20% become fathers by age 21 (Courtney et al., 2016, 2018).

Youth who have been in foster care are at risk for detrimental socioeconomic outcomes as they transition to adulthood, including educational and vocational challenges, homelessness, and dependence on public assistance (Courtney et al., 2018; Dworsky et al., 2013; Naccarato et al., 2010). These difficulties tend to be especially pronounced among parenting youth, who often struggle to finish school, obtain employment, and establish financial independence (Chase et al., 2006; Combs et al., 2017; Haight et al., 2009; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018). At the same time, many current and former foster youth find satisfaction in parenthood, and are motivated to become good parents, despite having limited resources and supports (Aparicio et al., 2018; Haight et al., 2009; Pryce & Samuels, 2010; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Given the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to examine the unique experiences of young parents with foster care histories in order to inform policies and practices that can help them succeed and thrive.

2.2. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth with foster care backgrounds

Preliminary research on the experiences of older foster youth during the COVID-19 pandemic has painted a concerning picture. A study by Greeson et al. (2020) has shown that youth ages 18 to 23 reported significant adverse effects of the pandemic in domains such as housing, employment, education, food security, and physical and mental health. In particular, 7% reported “couch surfing” or being homeless due to COVID-19, 55% reported food insecurity, 48% reported adverse effects on employment, 31% reported losing access to academic or postsecondary educational supports, and 52% reported adverse effects on physical or mental health.

A subsequent study by Ruff and Linville (2021) revealed that foster youth ages 18 to 26 reported heightened levels of concern due to COVID-19, especially as it pertained to financial stability, physical health, social support, relational and psychological wellbeing, and attaining professional goals. Most participants indicated that they had lost their job or worked reduced hours due to COVID-19, some faced financial strain and were at risk of homelessness, and many described intensified mental health symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and stress. Moreover, young people reported decreased access to critical resources, such as transportation and childcare assistance, due to shelter-in-place mandates and social distancing regulations.

The findings described above provide preliminary evidence for the negative effects of the pandemic on youth with foster care backgrounds. Although many of these effects are not unique to foster youth, the impact on these youth may be especially pronounced, given their pre-existing disadvantage and lack of resources and supports (Ruff & Linville, 2021). To optimize services to assist these vulnerable young people, additional information is necessary, including examining the unique experiences of those who parent young children.

2.3. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents of young children

Research on the effects of COVID-19 on parents of young children is in its infancy (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2020), and no known studies have focused specifically on foster youth. Accumulating evidence suggests that parents have experienced a range of unique challenges during the pandemic, such as increased caregiver burden (Russell et al., 2020), decreased parental satisfaction (Miller et al., 2020), and difficulties navigating home-based schooling and lack of childcare (Lee et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, these challenges were most pronounced among vulnerable and disadvantaged parents, such as those who experienced significant financial strain (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020). These findings have important implications for young parents with foster care backgrounds, as they represent one of the most economically and socially disadvantaged groups of young adults (Combs et al., 2017; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018).

3. Purpose of the present study

The purpose of the present study was to extend existing research on the experiences of youth with foster care backgrounds during the COVID-19 pandemic (Greeson et al., 2020; Ruff & Linville, 2021), and focus specifically on the experiences of parents of young children. The study's specific objectives were to: (a) examine the impact of COVID-19 on various life domains, such as education, employment, parenting, and physical and mental health, (b) explore the challenges in accessing critical resources and supports throughout the pandemic, and (c) provide practitioners and policymakers with tangible recommendations about ways in which they can support parenting foster youth and their children.

4. Methods

The present study was based on in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted with 17 young parents ages 18 to 26, who have recently aged out of foster care or were in extended care. Data collection was conducted virtually through online focus groups and individual interviews from January 2021 to April 2021. Youth were included in this study if they were (a) in foster care on or around their 17th birthday and have recently aged out of care or were currently in extended care, (b) had one or more biological or non-biological

Table 1
Participants' demographics ($N = 17$).

Characteristic	n (%) or mean (range)
Age	21.9 (18–26 years)
Race and ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic Black	3 (17.6%)
Non-Hispanic White	3 (17.6%)
American Indian/Alaska Native	1 (5.8%)
Multiracial	4 (23.5%)
Hispanic or Latinx (any race)	6 (35.2%)
Sex	
Male	3 (17.6%)
Female	14 (82.4%)
Geographic area	
West	9 (52.9%)
Northeast	1 (5.9%)
South	1 (5.9%)
Midwest	6 (35.2%)
Level of education	
High school diploma/GED	12 (70.6%)
Vocational certificate or license	1 (5.0%)
Associate's degree	3 (17.6%)
None of the above	1 (5.9%)
Foster care status	
Still in foster care	3 (17.6%)
No longer in foster care	14 (82.4%)
Parenthood status ^a	
Parenting biological children	17 (100%)
Parenting non-biological children	7 (41.2%)
Mean age of biological children	2.8 (1 month–10 years)
Current educational/vocational status ^b	
College student	5 (29.4%)
High school student/pursuing GED	1 (5.9%)
Employed full-time	3 (17.6%)
Not employed, but searching for work	5 (29.4%)
Not employed, and not searching for work	1 (5.9%)
Full-time caregiver of my child	8 (47.1%)

^a Parenthood categories are not mutually exclusive; percentage does not sum up to 100.

^b Categories are not mutually exclusive; percentage does not sum up to 100.

children, and (c) were in regular contact with their child(ren). Participants were recruited through flyers sent to social service agencies and social media posts to Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Youth from all states, US territories, and the District of Columbia were eligible to participate in this study, providing that they met the inclusion criteria described above.

Interested youth sent a text message to a central texting line set up by the study team to indicate their interest, after which a member of the study team reached out to confirm eligibility, explain the study procedures, and answer any questions. Next, youth were emailed an informed consent form inviting them to complete a brief demographic questionnaire through Qualtrics and indicate if they preferred to participate in a focus group or individual interview, based on their comfort level and availability.

A semi-structured interview guide was used for focus groups and individual interviews to structure our conversations with youth about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various life domains, such as education, employment, health and mental health, family and parenting, access to services, and sources of strength and resilience. Fourteen youth participated in four focus groups, and three youth participated in individual interviews. All group and individual interviews were co-facilitated by a member of the research team and a young parent with lived experience in foster care. The interviews were audio-recorded, naturalistically transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy prior to analysis. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) affiliated with the first author's university.

4.1. Participants' characteristics

All participating youth were aged 18 to 26 years, and the majority were women, and Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). Participants resided in various geographic areas, including West, Northeast, South, and Midwest. All participants reported parenting at least one biological child, and many also reported parenting non-biological children, such as siblings and step-children. The ages of youths' biological children ranged from 1 month to 10 years-old, and over 50% had more than one biological child. Fourteen participants had aged out of foster care at the time of the interview, and three youth were still in extended care. See Table 1 below for a full description of youths' demographic characteristics.

4.2. Analytic strategy

We employed a structured thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with two data analysts per transcript and weekly peer debriefing. We immersed ourselves in each transcript through multiple readings, coded each transcript line by line, organized codes into a thematic structure, checked the structure against the data, and named the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition to peer debriefing, we maintained a clear audit trail practiced reflexivity throughout to increase the study's rigor and trustworthiness (Padgett, 1998).

4.3. Positionality

Our research team included two young parenting former foster youth, one community-based researcher, four graduate students, and three university professors of public health and social work (one of whom is a former foster youth and teen parent). We are a diverse group with regard to gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity, including Black, Latinx, and White team members. We practiced reflexivity throughout this study, to reflect on our experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were varied, and discussed the challenges some of us faced as parents of young children. This process ensured that we authentically re-presented participants' perspectives without our beliefs having undue influence on the analyses.

5. Results¹

Analysis of focus group and interview data revealed five major themes in youths' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) employment disruptions and economic hardships; (2) educational challenges for parents and their children; (3) parental and child mental health concerns; (4) insufficient resources and barriers to service receipt; and (5) "silver linings". These themes are described in detail below.

5.1. Theme 1: employment disruptions and economic hardships

Young parents in the present sample reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to obtain and maintain employment, resulting in significant financial strain. Some youth indicated that they abruptly lost their job during the early stages of the pandemic, as shelter-in-place mandates were implemented in many states. This sudden loss of employment left the youth unprepared, and they have struggled to meet their families' needs. As Franny¹, age 24, explained: "I was working with the county, and right when they got the okay to shut everything down, they let a lot of people go. So like I was providing on that income, and when my job just left, it was so hard because of my two [year old son]...He needed diapers, and it was so hard to get diapers."

Young parents have noted that the abrupt loss of employment was especially challenging because they did not have family supports

¹ Pseudonyms selected by the youth are used throughout the manuscript.

and financial safety nets often available to those who have not been in foster care. In the absence of such supports, young people in the present sample had to rely on policy interventions and other governmental initiatives to meet their family's basic needs. As Rose, age 22, explained: *"Thankfully, our electricity has not been turned off...I used to pay the electricity bill, and now we're so far behind, but they can't turn the electric off during the winter here in Vermont."*

Some participants were able to avoid layoffs during the early stages of the pandemic, however, school closures and lack of childcare has made it difficult to continue working or required cutting back on work hours. Such difficulties were exacerbated by the absence of extended families and other supportive networks. This is reflected in a quote by Celina, age 23: *"So I was, like, working, and my kids were all in daycare...but with COVID happening, and everything being shut down, my two sons go to a special... school for kids with autism, and they closed that down. [So] like I had to quit work. I don't have, like, any other option for childcare. I don't have family. I don't have, like, friends [to rely on for childcare]."*

Other youth explained that they had concerns about continuing working, given the high risk of contracting COVID-19 for themselves or their children. These youth felt that they were forced to choose between the safety of their family and meeting their basic needs, which led to stress and anxiety. As explained by Ben, age 21: *"[At] their daycare... I felt like... they wasn't properly sanitizing everything, so I was kind of nervous to bring my kids back to daycare, but at the same time I had to provide and stuff for them, so I was like it's either that or stay home...I was like well, I have to do what I have to do for my family, so I literally had to trust them [with] my kid[s]... making sure they were doing everything that they needed to do".*

Overall, young parents reported a range of employment-related challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as abruptly losing their job due to shelter-in-place mandates, barriers related to school closures and securing reliable childcare, and concerns regarding COVID-19 exposure and the risk to their young children. Disruption of employment resulted in significant financial strain, limiting the youths' ability to meet their families' basic needs, such as food, utilities, and other essentials. Young people have noted that the absence of extended families and other supportive networks often exacerbated the aforementioned difficulties.

5.2. Theme 2: educational challenges for parents and children

The second theme in youths' experiences of the pandemic was educational challenges. This included the challenges of parents who attended educational programs, and the challenges of their children, due to school closures and the transition to online learning.

Young people who attended educational programs discussed the difficulties linked to campus closures, such as inability to access the library and lack of quiet learning spaces. As explained by Angel, age 19: *[It] made it really difficult for me because, as somebody who's been trying to graduate for a while, I couldn't go in and do my classes. I couldn't go in and study. I couldn't go get the books I needed 'cause the library out here is closed."* These challenges had a detrimental effect on youths' educational progress, as most did not have viable alternatives to campus-based resources. Faced with limited resources and other pandemic-related stressors, young parents disengaged from their educational programs, struggled to obtain passing grades, and felt that their educational goals have been halted indefinitely.

Youth also noted that the transition to online learning has been challenging, especially if they needed more intensive educational supports. As noted by Tita, age 20: *"I have already been out of school for a year now, and I decided to go to college. And this experience, like, doing it over the computer has been very difficult for me. Um, just kind of overwhelming and makes it even harder."* Other pandemic-related stressors, such as unemployment, financial strain, and intensive parenting responsibilities further limited the youths' ability to focus on school while having no in-person contact. Juliet, age 24, explained this as following: *Um, with COVID and then all the extra things that I was doing every day and then not being able to go out and get that interaction that I needed... it kinda mentally impaired me from being able to focus on my classes. Um, like, when I would sit down... [the] quality of my work was — not where it should be as well as, um, the effort and the time that I'm willing to put towards it."*

Young parents shared tangible concerns about completing their education, given the COVID-19 restrictions and lack of available childcare. As noted by Celina, age 23: *"I have, like, one more test to get my GED, and I wasn't able to go do that because COVID happened and closed [the testing center]. And now that they opened it back up, I don't have childcare at all to do it".* As previously noted, growing up in foster care often meant that these youth did not have families or other networks to help with childcare; therefore, the closure of schools and childcare facilities had far-reaching implications on their ability to maintain educational progress.

Finally, participants discussed the difficulties of online schooling for their biological and non-biological children, and talked about the stress of helping them navigate remote learning. Youth described various technical problems, such as the need to manage multiple devices and help their children utilize online systems. This was explained by Juliet, age 24: *"It's bad. It's a complete mess as far as my own schooling and the kids' schooling... between computers shutting down and, like, the different ways that teachers are teaching now versus when I learned... [And] navigating all the different systems that everybody has for everything...It's just so many programs and so many different things to keep track of".* Young people also indicated that their children did not enjoy online learning, and it had an adverse effect on their psychological and social functioning. As described by Celina, age 23: *"My oldest, I know it bothers her a lot too because she's, like, "well, mom, why can't I go see this friend?" Or, "mom, why can't I go back to this school?... It made her a little lonely too. Like, she feels like she doesn't have friends anymore".* Phamous, age 25, shared similar concerns about her siblings and other children in her care: *"I see, like, a tremendous change in, like, their social interaction. Um, their behavior levels are a little higher. Um, they get a little more irritable, um, and I think that the online learning is really, like, not working."*

Overall, young parents reported significant educational challenges due to COVID-19, both for themselves and their children. Youth attending educational programs described the challenges of remote learning, felt that their ability to focus on school was impaired, and were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their long-term educational goals. Furthermore, participants reported that online schooling did not work well for their children, causing them emotional distress and requiring close monitoring, which sometimes came at the expense of the parents' ability to work and meet their family's needs.

5.3. Theme 3: parental and child mental health concerns

A third theme in participants' experiences of the pandemic was mental health challenges. Nearly all youth have noted the adverse effects of the pandemic on their mental health, primarily due to isolation and the stresses of job loss and financial problems. Many youth had pre-existing mental health challenges linked to their foster care backgrounds, which were exacerbated during the pandemic. Lilly, age 21, described these issues as following: *"I've been really stressed out...I'm homeless. I don't have a car. I need to get a job, and then, like, lack of childcare and plus, like, trusting the place that I choose to put my daughter at... I've always had really bad anxiety, but I think it's definitely worsened this year."* Angel, age 19, alluded to similar problems: *"I've definitely noticed that being in the house more has made me a little bit more depressed 'cause I already have depression and anxiety as it is... When I don't have... social life anymore because of COVID, it's just really hard to stay positive about things that are going on. And especially when I don't have a job on top of that..."*

For some young parents, the ability and desire to seek mental health treatment was limited for a variety of reasons. Angel, age 19, shared her thoughts about preferring not to access mental health services at a distance: *"Talking to a therapist over the phone is not how I wanna be, uh, talking to somebody that I wanna express my feelings and problems"*. Lilly, age 21, expressed concerns about long waitlists for mental health services, which discouraged her from seeking treatment: *"I still haven't gone to therapy, I do think I could benefit from it, but it's so hard. Like... it was hard back then to get into therapy. So I can't imagine how backed up they are now, so I don't know."* These difficulties were compounded by isolation, intensive parenting responsibilities, and limited ability to use informal coping strategies to mitigate emotional stress. As explained by Celina, age 23: *"My mental health kinda went down too 'cause... I'm not able to just go do, like, even something like, stay at the park... That was a little break for me while my kids played... I can't do any of that either."*

Youth talked extensively about the difficulties associated with disconnection and loneliness, especially as shelter-in-place mandates were implemented early in the pandemic. For youth who were still in foster care, this was exacerbated by restrictive policies enacted at their placements. Camila, age 18, discussed these challenges: *"Um, like, the girls that were at my placement, we couldn't go out and go do anything because of COVID. And my placement was really strict on, like, leaving, so I couldn't really do anything that I enjoyed. I had to, like, be in the placement, in my room all the time. And so being-being pregnant wasn't really, like—it wasn't, like, the happiest, like, time of my life because it was just really lonely. And I couldn't have anybody visit me, so it was really frustrating and lonely."* Celina, age 23, discussed the mental health effects of disconnection and loneliness as a young person with few supports: *"I would say for me, um, I'm, like, super lonely now... I just, I feel like I'm... constantly just with my kids, and... that kind of just makes it hard for me 'cause I don't really have nobody to talk to. I don't have, like, friends... I have my dad, but, I'm, like, not close to my dad right now..."*

Finally, young people talked about mental health concerns for their children, especially those who were older at the start of the pandemic. As noted by Franny, age 24: *"...I saw the impact it had on my daughter from being in school to being around all her friends to just being around me and her brothers... Um, my daughter had a hard time... Um, she was sad"*. The need to be emotionally available for their children, while simultaneously navigating their own mental health challenges, was particularly taxing for some participants.

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic had numerous, detrimental effects on participants' mental health, often exacerbating pre-existing mental health challenges. Young parents in our sample reported feeling anxious, lonely, and depressed, and had a limited ability to cope with such feelings, either through therapy or by informal strategies. These challenges often impacted other domains in young people's lives, such as their ability to parent effectively and engage in school and work-related activities.

5.4. Theme 4: insufficient resources and barriers to service receipt

The fourth theme in youths' experiences of the pandemic was insufficient resources and barriers to service receipt. Participants reported that accessing pandemic relief funds and other financial resources was challenging, and many were unable to navigate this process successfully. The reasons for youths' difficulties were complex, including eligibility problems, difficulty to obtain necessary documents, and limited ability to problem-solve when their application was rejected. These challenges were often linked to youths' foster care backgrounds and lack of supportive adults in their lives. Tita, age 20, explained: *"The stimulus checks were based off of 2019, um, taxes. And all the way up until the end of 2019, I was a ward of the state, so I was in OCS custody. So... I was never able to get mine or get one for my son because I was claimed on someone else's taxes."* Juliet, age 24, noted: *"I have access to everything, but sometimes I don't understand it... [And] then all of a sudden, you get something in the mail, and they're like, 'You need to do this, this, and this.' And it's like, 'Okay... How do I go about doing this?' There's not anybody there to turn around and be like, 'Hey, this is how you do it. Let me sit down with you, show you, or talk to you about it.'"*

For some youth, access difficulties were compounded by the closure of social service agencies which they relied on for various instrumental supports. As explained by Donatello, age 20: *"I'm in Iowa Aftercare, and I have an advocate. And when the corona pandemic and everything happened, we stopped having face-to-face meetings.... My Aftercare worker would, uh, help me fill out other paperwork for grants and, you know, extra funding and things of the such, which then became harder for me to acquire because, um, I don't particularly really know where to get, you know, those kind of things... She kind of helped walk me through the filling out process on certain things that I didn't understand as well."* Rose, age 22, discussed not being aware of available resources, and alluded to the difficulties navigating paperwork without help from knowledgeable adults: *"I definitely would have filled out the information if I knew of it... I never knew about, like, unemployment, or that you could even, like, file for unemployment... So I think that like if, um, like, someone were to, like, tell me that it was a thing, and to help me, like, fill out the paperwork, so I wasn't like just guessing what to put..."*

Overall, nearly all participants reported that they lacked critical resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially financial supports and other tangible forms of assistance. Some of the aforementioned difficulties were linked to youths' foster care backgrounds, including problems obtaining certain documents and absence of supportive adults who could help with the application process. However, young people also noted that pandemic-related stressors and intensive parenting responsibilities made it more

challenging to focus on complex and time-consuming tasks, including applying for supports and services.

5.5. Theme 5: “silver linings”

The final theme in youths’ experiences was “silver linings”- the unexpected, positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the complex challenges described above, youth were mindful of the pandemic’s positive impact on their lives. Participants alluded to several benefits, chief of which was the ability to spend more time with their children and families. For example, Hope, age 20, has noted: *“I guess... it has been, also, good 'cause I've gotten to spend a lot of time with, um, my kids and my newer baby... I didn't have a job to worry about, like maternity leave and stuff like that, you know? So, I've gotten to kind of just soak in all the newborn baby stuff.”* Juliet, age 24, reported similar benefits, despite experiencing financial strain: *“Like, financially, it sucks, but I also, like, have this time to watch my daughter, who is a year and a half, grow...watch her brain work when she'd normally be in a daycare. As well as, like, my sister, I just got custody of her, officially, and I've been fighting it...Um, and also, to focus on her school work 'cause she never went to school before I got her. And so, it allows me to sit down with her and give her that help she needs. So, in a way, it's kind of been a little bit of a blessing, too, just some rough patches, financially...”*

For several young women, the transition to new motherhood during a pandemic was, in some ways, a positive experience, because it allowed them to recover physically and have much needed bonding time with their infants. This was explained by Aja, age 22: *“I think there was some positive things...like after I had my baby, it was in September, and I got to heal. You know, I got to stay home...I got to, um, yeah, heal and be with my baby. So we got to bond, and we have an attachment and stuff like that. That's good”*.

Overall, young people were able to appreciate “taking a break” from their busy schedules and multiple, overlapping commitments, and enjoyed spending time with their children, spouses, and families. Although they recognized the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, they were appreciative of the aforementioned positive effects.

6. Discussion

This study is the first known investigation of the experiences of parenting foster youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with prior studies of foster youth (Greeson et al., 2020; Ruff & Linville, 2021), participants reported a range of negative effects from the pandemic. This included employment-related challenges, financial hardships, educational concerns for parents and children, and mental health symptoms, including anxiety, depression, and stress. Moreover, youth experienced difficulties accessing financial assistance, such as pandemic relief funds and unemployment benefits. Despite these challenges, participants were mindful of the pandemic’s positive effects, such as more time to spend with their children and families.

The abrupt beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic brought monumental challenges to parents of young children, as many lost their jobs, and were cut-off from childcare services, and other sources of support (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2020). Young parents in the current sample discussed the challenges of home-based education for their children, and noted its adverse effects on both parental and child mental health. For many youth, the closure of schools and childcare centers also meant loss of employment, as they did not have flexible job options or supportive families to rely on for childcare. Youth facing financial strain turned to public assistance to meet their basic needs, which was often insufficient or difficult to access. Participants enrolled in educational programs struggled with campus closures and lack of reliable childcare, setting them further behind in attaining their educational goals.

In many ways, the challenges described above are not unique to youth with foster care backgrounds (e.g., Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2020). Nevertheless, young parents in the current sample described particularly far-reaching effects, encompassing multiple life domains. Their challenges were linked primarily to lack of family supports and safety nets often available to those who have not been in foster care. For instance, most participants did not have extended families to rely on for childcare, compounding the detrimental impact of school closures. Overall, foster care alumni tend to be socially and economically disadvantaged as compared to their non-foster care peers (Courtney et al., 2005; Courtney et al., 2018), and this may be even more pronounced for young parents, due to pre-existing gaps in educational and vocational attainment (Combs et al., 2017; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018), and limited social supports (Haight et al., 2009; Pryce & Samuels, 2010).

The study participants also discussed mental health challenges, noting symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. Parental mental health concerns were often linked to financial problems, feelings of isolation and loneliness, and high caregiving burden with limited supports. These findings are aligned with studies from the general population of parents, who also noted increased mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Russel et al., 2020). However, young parents in our sample had limited access to both formal and informal mental health supports, making it harder to address these challenges. The absence of mental health supports is concerning, as youth with foster care backgrounds are vulnerable to emotional problems (McMillen et al., 2005; Munson et al., 2020), due to a history of child maltreatment and the trauma of child welfare involvement.

Importantly, young parents in our sample described significant challenges accessing various emergency supports, such as pandemic relief funds, unemployment benefits, and other resources. The reasons for such challenges were complex, including limited offerings, lack of awareness of specific resources, problems navigating the application process, and difficulties solving technical issues without help from knowledgeable adults. The need for caring adults to help youth navigate the transition from foster care to independent living was noted in numerous prior investigations (Collins et al., 2010; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Spencer et al., 2018). The outbreak of COVID-19 posed an unprecedented challenge for these young people, further emphasizing the need for knowledgeable and caring adults in their lives.

6.1. Implications, limitations, and future directions

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected American families, and these effects may have far-reaching implications (Miller et al., 2020). Research shows that the adverse effects of the pandemic tend to be most pronounced among economically vulnerable segments of the population (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2020), which is further emphasized by our study's findings. The intersection of child welfare involvement and early parenthood puts our participants at disadvantage as compared to other young adults (Combs et al., 2017; Shpiegel & Cascardi, 2018), making it harder to manage pandemic-related stressors. Given the pre-existing disadvantage of young parents with foster care backgrounds, supportive services are essential to help them succeed and thrive.

Specific services that can assist this population include, for instance, emergency financial resources, moratoriums on eviction and turning off utilities, targeted childcare assistance, mental health supports, and intensive case management. Instituting a moratorium on discharging youth from foster care for the duration of the pandemic is also critical to facilitate access to services (Greeson et al., 2020). Moreover, suspending school and work requirements for remaining in extended foster care, and allowing youth to re-enter care after exit, should be considered while the pandemic lasts (Greeson et al., 2020). For youth who may be hesitant to remain in the foster care system, supports should be conceptualized more broadly to include community programs, such as supplemental nutrition programs (e.g., WIC) and early childhood home visiting and care programs (e.g., Head Start). Although some of the aforementioned strategies (e.g., a moratorium on discharging youth from foster care) have been implemented in the beginning of the pandemic, this response has not been consistent, and its sustainability over time is unclear. Federal guidance on these matters is critical, especially given the pandemic's lasting effects.

Additionally, it is important to remove barriers to service receipt and ensure that all foster youth can access pandemic relief funds. Young parents in the present study described multiple challenges in accessing emergency assistance, especially given the absence of caring adults who could help navigate the application process. Applying for financial supports during national emergencies should not be made unnecessarily complicated, and automatic eligibility should be considered, when possible. Additionally, child welfare systems and community partners should allocate emergency funds for case managers, who could help navigate available resources and connect youth with appropriate services. Such assistance should be given irrespective of foster care status, as youth who recently aged out of foster care may be in dire need of help from caring and knowledgeable adults.

Finally, youth with foster care backgrounds and their children should have access to mental health services, particularly during emergency situations. Mental health symptoms were widely reported among the study participants, and these were frequently unaddressed, due to limited access to both formal and informal supports. Research shows that parenting is stressful even under normal circumstances (Deater-Deckard, 2008), and such stresses are amplified during emergencies such as COVID-19 (Russell et al., 2020). Youth with foster care backgrounds, who are already at high risk for mental health challenges, should be prioritized for psychological help that is freely available and accessible.

The findings of this exploratory study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, we relied on a sample of young parents residing in specific geographic areas in the US. Considerations related to the sample's characteristics are important because shelter-in-place mandates, school policies, and other COVID-19 mitigation strategies are highly localized, and broader generalizations may not be possible. Second, the current sample was predominantly female; thus, we know less about the unique experiences of fathers during the pandemic. Third, data collection for the present study began in January 2021, ten months after the onset of the pandemic in the US. Although participants were asked to describe their experiences throughout the entire period, it is possible that their accounts of early events were inaccurate or affected by more recent events. Finally, while youths' foster care backgrounds likely amplified pandemic-related challenges, the precise effect of child welfare involvement is difficult to determine, and young parents who have not been in foster care may reported similar experiences. Despite these limitations, our data provide the first known account of parenting foster youths' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, elevating the unique voices of this vulnerable population.

Future studies should recruit a sample of parenting foster youth from broader geographic areas and include more fathers to examine their unique experiences. In addition, research should examine differences in the experiences of parents who are still in foster care, as opposed to those who had aged out of foster care (as was the case for most young people in the current sample). Last, studies are needed to examine policy and practice interventions that can most effectively assist these vulnerable young parents during emergency situations.

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